

This Week in Washington



WITH CONGRESSMAN
JO BONNER

Time to get on with modernizing the aging aerial tanker fleet

Congressman Artur Davis (D-AL) and I penned an editorial providing recommendations for the Department of Defense as the tanker competition moves forward and calling for the process to proceed with all due speed. The editorial ran in the Washington Times last week and is printed in its entirety below:

The Air Force is moving forward with yet another Request for Proposal (RFP) to replace the ever aging KC-135 Aerial Refueling Tanker. Since 2001, the Pentagon has been in the process of replacing the aging tanker. These aircraft average 50 years of age, and they are showing the strain of their age. The defense secretary has declared it a strategic priority to modernize these tankers for a new century's threats.

Yet, eight years later, a new tanker has not been built, and the acquisition process is mired in Washington politics. Our potential adversaries are watching while we debate, and delay. As Members of Congress and as advocates for the warfighter, we would like to offer some thoughts from this side of the Potomac River.

First, build on the original RFP that worked.□

Build on the RFP that was issued January 30, 2007, after being thoroughly vetted through three publicly-issued drafts. The 150-person Department of Defense (DoD) source selection team invested tens of thousands of hours in crafting that RFP and understanding the competitor's proposals. Don't throw their work away.

The GAO did find a grand total of eight discrepancies in the handling of that RFP out of the 111 complaints Boeing alleged in its protest. Rather than begin anew, the RFP should be tweaked to address those eight GAO issues, and then we should move forward with the source selection.

To go back to square one to create a new RFP will add years – and millions of additional dollars – to the process. Nothing in the GAO findings demands a start from scratch.

Second, keep the playing field level.□

If the RFP is slanted to predetermine a winner, then there will not be a meaningful competition. Without a real competition, we run the risk of repeating the one-sided KC-767 lease deal. Boeing is a proud company with a distinguished tradition, but the record of that deal is replete with proved corruption and excessive costs.

This lesson is unmistakable: rigorous competition yields better deals for the taxpayer and provides more capability for the warfighter. A multi-billion dollar contract deserves more than a sole source.

Third, shoot down any low-cost shoot-out plans that may be under consideration.

This approach, even under DoD regulations, is clearly not appropriate for a procurement of this size and complexity. The contest between Northrop Grumman/EADS and Boeing pits the derivatives of two commercial aircraft with different inherent capabilities against each other. The best plane for the mission should win this contest.

The warfighter has said “more is better” when it comes to the capability to offload fuel at range, to deliver cargo, to carry passengers, and to evacuate casualties. Those additional capabilities

must be considered as a trade-off with cost to determine which aircraft represents the best overall value.

Fourth, the Northrop Grumman bid means nearly 50,000 American jobs.

With the severe economic recession, there are understandable concerns that the building of a new tanker should mean American jobs. It is false to claim that only one of the competitors meets this goal. The fact is the Northrop Grumman/EADS aircraft will be built in the United States, by Americans, under the terms of the Buy America Act. The demands of the contract will employ nearly 50,000 US workers in 50 states.

Some Boeing partisans have argued that the presence of a foreign partner, EADS, should be disqualifying--a curious sentiment for a company that has a far-flung network of foreign subsidiaries and suppliers. The fact is, our country benefits from the global nature of defense and aerospace, an environment, by the way, in which Europe spends four to six defense dollars in the United States for every one dollar we spend in Europe. U.S. defense and aerospace firms would be the big losers if there were a protectionist retreat from the global defense industry.

Finally, be open to compromise on the prospect of a dual award.□

DoD has asserted that awarding two contracts will cost significantly more money than a single award. However, there are a number of credible, independent voices who have no stake in this debate who counter that assertion.

A number of authorities, including Chairman John Murtha of the House Defense Appropriations Subcommittee and Chairman Neil Abercrombie of the House Subcommittee on Air and Land Forces believe that doubling production through dual contract awards can actually save the Pentagon money by triggering continuous competition and by allowing for more rapid retirement of aging KC-135s. A dual contract may well be the only way to break the political impasse and to avoid another lengthy round of protests.

In closing, we urge DoD to move forward on this program with all due speed, taking these recommendations into consideration. The men and women of our military are depending on solutions, not politics. The same can be said for our nation, which awaits results.

My staff and I work for you. If we can ever be of service, do not hesitate to call my office toll free at 1-800-288-8721.

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